

# The Elephant's Trumpet for Taming the Dragon

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*"There cannot be two suns in the sky,  
Nor two emperors on the earth"*

-Confucius

## Abstract

*China's strategic historical thought processes and military culture have played pivotal roles in shaping its foreign policy and international relations. To understand the dynamics between the two Asian giants. China and India, it is essential to dissect China's historical beliefs, military philosophy, and how these factors influence its interactions with India, with the resulting impact on Sino-Indian relations and the implications for India. The historical palette of ancient China, where dynasties rose and fell, where the hues of internal politics changed with seasons; has left an indelible imprint on the country's strategic thinking. It would be highly instructive to examine the historical linkages in depth so as to understand the driver behind all Chinese engagements with their neighbours, adversaries and the world in general. It is also informative to note that China does not believe in friends since it eyes all other nations as subservient. The Indian leadership needs to learn to manage China deftly and defeat them in their own game. The second part delves into the modern trends, the future of Sino-Indian relations, and the way ahead concluding with the key proposals for India's China policy.*

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLIV, No. 636, April-June 2024.*

## Introduction

China, with its millennia-old civilisation, has a strategic culture and military stratagem deeply rooted in history, philosophy, and the Art of War. This article embarks on an exploration of the intricate shades of Chinese strategic culture, delving into its historical origins, the philosophical influences that shape it, and how it manifests in the military concepts employed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the other arms of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Central Military Commission (CMC). It is essential to unravel the nuances of China's approach to strategy, avoiding the pitfalls of clichés and delving into the depths of its unique strategic ethos.

China's strategic historical thought process and military culture have played pivotal roles in shaping its foreign policy and international relations. This is particularly evident in its complex relationship with India. To understand the dynamics between the two Asian giants, it is essential to dissect China's historical beliefs and military philosophy, and how these factors influence its interactions with India, with the resulting impact on Sino-Indian relations and the implications for India.<sup>1</sup> The article has been formulated in two parts, with this part featuring historical beliefs and philosophical developments over the ages till recent times.

## Historical Beliefs

### Historical Foundations: The Canvas of Ancient China.

- The historical palette of ancient China, where dynasties rose and fell, where the hues of internal politics changed with seasons; has left an indelible imprint on the country's strategic thinking. The concept of the 'Mandate of Heaven' asserting the divine sanction of rulership, has historically guided the governance and military endeavours of the Chinese. It represents a moral framework, emphasising the legitimacy of power and the duty of rulers to maintain harmony.
- "From the emergence of China as a unified state in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC until the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, China stood at the centre of an East Asian international system of remarkable durability. China called itself *Zhongguo* (Central state or states) - The Middle Kingdom. A special feature of the Chinese civilisation is that it seems to have no

beginning. It appears in history less as a conventional nation-state than a permanent natural phenomenon. In the tale of the Yellow Emperor, revered by many Chinese as a legendary founding ruler, China seems to already exist. After each collapse, the Chinese state reconstituted itself as if by some immutable law of nature".<sup>2</sup>

- As dynasties shifted, so did the font of Chinese military stratagem. From the grand strategies of empires to the tactical brilliance of commanders like Sun Tzu, history laid the groundwork for a strategic culture that balances continuity with adaptation.

- The Chinese order believed that the Emperor was a figure with no parallels in the world and he combined the spiritual as well as secular prerogatives, being the political ruler as well as bigger than life concept. The emperor was considered as mankind's supreme sovereign, the Emperor of humanity. The Chinese protocol insisted on recognising his overlordship through the act of complete prostration, with the forehead touching the ground three times on each prostration.<sup>3</sup>

- "The Chinese believe that the neighbouring countries benefited from contact with China and civilisation so long as they acknowledged the suzerainty of the Chinese government. Those who did not were termed 'Barbarians'. Subservience to the emperor and observance of imperial rituals was the core of their culture. Chinese statesman relied on a rich array of diplomatic and economic instruments to draw potentially hostile foreigners into relationships the Chinese could manage. China exploited divisions amongst the barbarians, famously using barbarians to check barbarians and when necessary, using barbarians to attack barbarians".<sup>4</sup> This implies that the Chinese were adept at wily statecraft, where they exploited one adversary against the other to gain an advantage.

- "The five baits as practised by the Hun dynasty were used with guile to befuddle the opponent. To give them elaborate clothes and carriages in order to corrupt their eyes. To give them fine food in order to corrupt their mouths. To give them music and women in order to corrupt their ears. To give them lofty buildings, granaries and slaves in order to

corrupt their stomachs. For those who come to surrender, the emperor should show them favour by honouring them with an imperial reception party in which the emperor would personally serve them wine and food so as to corrupt their mind”.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese have been using these in modified forms in modern times, wherein, they use these forms of corruption to mislead their adversaries into believing their charade and inducing a sense of complacency. Negotiations post the Galwan Crisis with the Chinese have been proving to be a game of statecraft, guile, unverifiable promises, nebulous steps, delay tactics and a vague future, all aimed at psychological dominance.

- “China’s exceptionalism is cultural; it does not proselytise like the Christian or Muslim faiths or the American exceptionalism which wants to spread its values to every part of the world”.<sup>6</sup> It does not claim that its contemporary institutions are relevant for others outside China. It considers itself a heir of the Middle Kingdom tradition, which formally graded all other states as various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms; in other words, a kind of cultural universality.

- In statecraft, the Chinese stress subtlety, indirection and the patient accumulation of relative advantage. “China’s most enduring game is *Wei Qi* (Go) that is a game of surrounding pieces and implies a concept of strategic encirclement. *Wei Qi* is about the protracted campaign where the player seeks relative advantage and aims to encircle the enemy”.<sup>7</sup> The game is also known as ‘Go’ is a game of encirclement and capture, that takes place on a board of 361 squares. “The object of Go is not to capture the opponent’s actual pieces but rather to surround empty territory on the board. This is done by building encircling ‘Walls’ around these empty spaces. The game is played by two people, with a black and white set of pieces, just as in chess. *Wei Qi* generates strategic flexibility”.<sup>8</sup> Chinese thinkers like Sun Tzu placed a premium on victory through psychological advantage and preached the avoidance of direct conflict. “The Chinese thinking as against Western philosophy is based on the prominence of psychological and political elements, compared to the purely military”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Philosophical Palette: Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism.**

- The rich philosophical palette comprising of the colours of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism painted the mosaic of the strategic culture of China, giving various hues to its military doctrines and national ethos. Confucian ideals of benevolence, righteousness, and propriety extend to the realm of warfare, emphasising the ethical conduct of military operations, and providing the underlying base to the strategic canvas.
- Daoism's influence provides the flow and mix of colours to the overlying strategic creation, introducing the concept of *Wu Wei*, or 'Effortless Action'. This concept believes in a flexible and adaptive approach to strategy, echoing the importance of aligning with the natural flow of events.
- On the contrary, legalism, with its pragmatic emphasis on strict laws and state control, contributes to the realpolitik aspect of Chinese strategy, providing the definition to the characters on the canvas. It underscores the necessity of a powerful state apparatus to ensure order and stability, reflected in the centralised command structure of the PLA. This is visibly evident in the centralised control exercised by the CPC and the CMC.

### **The Art of War: Sun Tzu's Enduring Legacy.**

- At the heart of Chinese military stratagem lies the timeless wisdom encapsulated in Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War'. Far from a mere treatise on battlefield tactics, Sun Tzu's work explores the psychology of conflict, the technique of strategic ruse, and the importance of understanding both self and adversary. As the master Sun Tzu said, "Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle, but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting".<sup>10</sup>
- Sun Tzu's aphorisms, such as "All warfare is based on deception" and "Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" reverberate through the corridors of military academies and strategy chambers worldwide. The enduring relevance of Sun Tzu's insights attests to the perennial wisdom encapsulated in his words.

- Sun Tzu gave an important insight into the word *Shi*, which connotes the strategic trend or potential energy of a developing situation, or the power inherent in the particular arrangement of elements and its developmental tendency. For Sun Tzu, mastering *shi* is akin to water flowing downhill automatically finding the swiftest and easiest course along the path of least resistance.

## **As the Dragon Rises**

### **The Century of Humiliation and National Rejuvenation.**

- “The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, known as the ‘Century of Humiliation’, marked a tumultuous period in Chinese history. Foreign invasions, internal strife, and economic exploitation left a lasting impact on the Chinese psyche. Century of Humiliation or ‘Hundred Years of National Humiliation’ describes the period of intervention, and subjugation of the Qing dynasty and China by Western powers and Japan from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the People’s Republic winning the Civil War in 1949”.<sup>11</sup>
- The use of the term *Quru* or Humiliation arose in the atmosphere of rising Chinese nationalism opposing the ‘Twenty-One Demands’ made by the Japanese government in 1915 and grew with protests against China’s treatment in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and Chinese Communist Party popularised the characterisation in the 1920s, protesting the unequal treaties and loss of territory. In the 1930s and 1940s, it became common to refer to ‘A Century of Humiliation’. Although the formal treaty provisions were ended, the idea remains a central concept in Chinese nationalism, widely used in both political and popular culture.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mao’s era.**

- Mao Zedong, as the leader of the new Communist China after the Great Revolution, unleashed wave after wave of struggle and did not permit the Chinese people to rest on their accomplishments. Mao was the first leader since the unification of China to tear apart Chinese traditions as a deliberate act of state policy. He believed that the only way for China to grow and break from its past was to rejuvenate China by dismantling, at times brutally, its ancient legacy.

- Mao articulated the canons of unending upheaval, but when the Chinese national interests required it, he could be patient and take a distant view. The manipulation of contradictions was his stated strategy. Yet it was in the service of an ultimate goal, drawn from the confusing concept of *Da tong* or the Great Harmony.
- The Great Leap Forward was a period of extreme sacrifices. It was a five-year economic plan executed by Mao Zedong and the CCP, begun in 1958 and abandoned in 1961. The goal was to modernise the country's agricultural sector using communist economic ideologies. Instead of stimulating the country's economy, the Great Leap Forward resulted in mass starvation and famine. It is estimated that between 30 and 45 million Chinese citizens died due to famine, execution, and forced labour, along with massive economic and environmental destruction. "The Great Leap Forward remains the largest episode of non-wartime mass killing in human history, and a clear example of the failures of socialism and economic central planning".<sup>13</sup> However, this episode strengthened the resolve of the CCP to pursue other means of national rejuvenation. The memory of this era has become a powerful driver of contemporary Chinese nationalism and the pursuit of national rejuvenation.
- "Mao dealt with this endemic state of affairs by pretending it did not exist. He claimed to be impervious to nuclear threats. Indeed, he developed a public posture of being willing to accept hundreds of millions of casualties, even welcoming it as a guarantee for the more rapid victory of communist ideology. He succeeded in making the rest of the world believe that he meant it - an ultimate test of credibility".<sup>14</sup>
- Mao, like several founders of dynasties before him, claimed the frontiers of China that the Empire had established at its maximum historic extent. The territories Mao considered part of historic China were Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia and border regions in the Himalayas.
- The melange of contradictions in Chinese society in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the struggle to keep the society on the path to progress through continued sacrifices and struggle and its stoic resilience are an ode to Mao as the people's leader. It is to his credit that despite all the pressures

and isolation in the world, he managed to foresee the Indian reluctance to kowtow to their requests and led a military campaign that further proved his mettle as a leader and visionary. Nehru was faced with all-round opprobrium for his unrealistic hubris, not just within the country but across the world and he never could rise from this affront.

### **The Handshake of the Eagle and the Dragon.**

- Henry Kissinger, one of the most erudite and egregious diplomats on China, unveiled an unequivocal narrative on Chinese historical culture involving its strategic thought process and worldview. He was responsible for the Nixon-Mao meeting in 1972, which opened the doors of Western technology for a beleaguered China. This was the impetus desperately needed by the Chinese to leap forward. Little did Kissinger know that the dragon he nurtured as a friend and helped grow, would one day spew fire at the United States (US) itself. An old adage goes, 'You create a tiger, tiger will eat you in the end'.
- Deng Xiaoping chose a method from Chinese classical history and gave the classical 24-character instruction and a 12-character explanation, which was restricted to high officials. The 21-character instruction read, "Observe carefully, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time. Be good at maintaining a low profile and never claim leadership".<sup>15</sup> The 12-character policy explanation followed with an even more restricted circulation among the leaders which read, "Enemy troops are outside the walls, they are stronger than we; we should be mainly on the defensive".
- "The resilience, capabilities and cohesion of the Chinese people, are the strengths on which the Chinese leadership rest their strategy. Chinese leaders have a profound faith in the Chinese people's ability to retain the essence amidst all vicissitudes".<sup>16</sup> Even today, the Chinese people are willing to live in isolation and insulation from the world within their so-called Middle Kingdom, insulated on social media, because of their faith in the leadership. They believe that with nothing to lose, you are ever stronger. China has always been the lone wolf and never cared for anyone else's concerns. China's determination to regain its historical status as a major global



power is evident in its current national strategy. China embraced the model of capitalism in the late 1980s, and liberal thought to an extent. But traditional centralised control and autocratic model of governance continued. The emphasis on economic development, military modernisation, and technological advancement aligns with the goal of restoring China to its perceived historical glory.

**Start of an Era.** Under the eagle's (US) sharp gaze, the dragon started growing, strengthening its wings, sharpening its claws and developing its fiery breath. The real economic development was propelled by the US technological assistance and funding, which suited both of these giants. For the US, they saw China as a hedge against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with whom the Han's relations were going downhill. The resilience and hard work of the Chinese peasant population, driven hard under a focused leadership of the CCP made progressive leaps and became the factory for the world. The sustained economic growth spurred Chinese forays into the military, technology, science and space domains further cementing its standing in the world. In the next part, the article explores the modern dynamics and the future developments.

*"The opportunity to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself".*

- Sun Tzu

## Conclusion

History has proven time and again that the primary guarantor of a nation's sovereignty is its military power. Investment in developing a future-ready and strong military may not appear to pay dividends in the short term but it adds immense value to the country's progress by ensuring its growth and survival. The gestation period for developing any military capability is nearly a decade and a half.

The dragon is likely to start flapping its wings in the later part of this decade as it starts matching US capability for capability, then would start growling to dictate terms by early next decade, roar to threaten enemies by the end of next decade and finally breathe fire to destroy its enemies in the decade starting 2040 to realise the master's dream of 2049. Therefore, if India has to be prepared for the Dragon's roar which may come close to the end

of the next decade and avoid its breath of fire, there is a need to put in motion the processes to step up military capabilities in this decade itself.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Kissinger Henry, 'On China' published by Penguin Books Ltd, ISBN 9780141049427.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>6</sup> Yuyang, "On China" Henry Kissinger, Sohu, 03 Dec 2019, Accessed 1529 h on 28 Nov 2023.

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